

# Draft Memorandum for the Record

## Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization

### Transit Working Group: Microtransit Forum Summary

January 18, 2022, Transit Working Group Forum

12:30 PM–2:30 PM, Zoom Video Conferencing Platform, link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TZxe4okoPg>

## Forum Agenda and Summary of Discussion

1. **Welcome**—*Tegin Teich, Executive Director, Central Transportation Planning Staff; Travis Pollack, Senior Transportation Planner, Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC); and Amira Patterson, Transportation Planner, Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) Advisory Board*

T. Teich gave a brief introduction of the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and the panelists in the forum. T. Pollack explained MAPC's role in regional planning and exploratory work on microtransit in the Boston region. A. Patterson gave an overview of the MBTA Advisory Board.

2. **Panel Presentations**—*Angela Constantino, Mobility Manager, Greater Attleboro–Taunton Regional Transit Authority (GATRA); Patrick Kennedy, Partner, Space Between Design Studio; Nicole Freedman, Director of Transportation Planning, City of Newton; and Chris Van Eyken, Senior Program Associate, TransitCenter*

### **GATRA Microtransit Service**

A. Constantino gave an outline of GATRA GO, a catch-all term for microtransit service offered by GATRA. GATRA introduced microtransit to southeastern Massachusetts in 2019 as a replacement for underperforming fixed-route services, a first- and last-mile solution to underserved regions, and an alternative to Transportation Network Company (TNC) services. Currently four GATRA GO services are in operation using dial-a-ride vehicles that were repurposed for microtransit: GATRA GO Connect, GATRA GO Coastline, GATRA GO United, and GATRA GO Explore. Each serves different communities with unique goals and challenges. Riders can make same-day reservations using mobile apps—Transloc and Spare Labs—and by phone.

GATRA GO Connect was launched in 2019 as a pilot and later as a replacement for a fixed route that connected commuters in Norton, Wheaton College, and Mansfield

Crossing to Mansfield MBTA station. Several challenges remain that are particular to the GATRA GO Connect program: directing student riders to specific stops on campus, working with the university to balance the finances, and service overlap in Foxborough.

GATRA GO Coastline was launched in October 2020 as a complementary service to the deviated fixed route in South Plymouth. It serves predominantly seniors trying to get to the senior center and medical appointments. The large service area has been a challenge for GATRA as it tries to run the program more efficiently.

GATRA GO United was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic as a replacement for a fixed-route service to provide local and long-distance medical transportation for riders in the Franklin, Wrentham, Foxborough, and Norfolk areas. Balancing finances was complicated as several entities representing different demographic groups expressed an interest in contributing to the budget.

GATRA GO Explore is an employment shuttle for Pembroke residents that provides trips within the Town of Pembroke and select locations outside of the service area. It was launched when a commuter shuttle attracted no ridership after it got suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic and brought back. It has been difficult to provide service for all eligible riders because the program is run with one vehicle and a lot of the places that people go to work are outside of the service area.

***Promise and Place of MicroTransit: Finding the Sweet Spot for On-Demand Service within a Complete Network Redesign***

P. Kennedy provided background on GoLink, microtransit in Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART). In recent years, Dallas has been grappling with a spatial mismatch, marked by a high concentration of low-income population in the south juxtaposed with job growth in the north towards the Oklahoma border and outside of the DART service area. In addition to highly segregated socioeconomic groups and land-use patterns, lack of state support for transit has made it challenging for DART to provide transit, despite continued population and economic growth in the region. The GoLink project was inspired by Houston's success in its 2014 bus network redesign, which connected one million more people to one million more jobs without an increase in budget by focusing on creating a gridded network.

Completed at the inception of the network redesign project, evaluation of DART's bus network at the time had brought to attention important issues related to service frequency. Notably, DART did not provide information on frequency or level of service in its bus route map or provide service that matches demand in the highest performing routes. Through stakeholder engagement, DART also learned that people value overall

travel time, and that increasing service frequency is preferred to expanding service coverage. Conceived as part of the agency's efforts to reallocate its resources, GoLink was introduced to very-low ridership areas in order for the agency to add frequency to high-performing routes.

Public engagement and participation was a key component in the bus network redesign; in order to maximize its benefit, the agency established two emergency funds—alpha fund and beta fund. Creation of these funds would allow people to react to system changes and the agency to remain flexible in service evaluation and adjustments. DART also created a customized interactive tool that shows overlay of two isochrones, which represents how far a rider can travel from a designated point within 60 minutes under the current operating scenario and after the overhaul of the bus network. This tool is aimed at communicating to the public about increased job access, increased service frequency, and creation of GoLink zones.

DART created an additional GoLink Zone in Inland Port, which is located outside of the service area. In order to connect the area to the bus network, the agency established a local government corporation, in partnership with the city, county, and businesses, where representatives from both the public and private sectors serve the board and contribute to funding. This corporation would allow DART to provide service in an area that is not contributing to the agency's revenue. Since its launch, the program has been successful: DART has seen an increase in both ridership and number of unique riders, and customer satisfaction has been consistently high. P. Kennedy also admitted that with the rise in demand, it will be challenging to maintain wait times of 15 minutes or less.

GoLink currently covers 30 percent of the service area, using three percent of the operating budget. In December, DART announced 30 additional GoLink Zones and is currently working with staff on service standards to ensure that the quality of service stays in line with the agency's objective metrics as new services continue to roll out. These objective metrics, called "Chutes and Ladders," are a critical determinant for service changes outside of the generally planned process. Savings from service reduction are channeled to service improvements to ensure that not only operational dollars stay in the system, but the operating budget also maintains the prescribed ratio for frequency and coverage.

P. Kennedy stated that given the short history of GoLink, DART is still trying to determine a sweet spot for subsidy per rider, rides per hour, or customer satisfaction. Demand for microtransit has increased, however, prompting a new challenge of meeting

the demand without letting microtransit cannibalizing from the rest of the operations system.

***NewMo: Newton's Citywide Transportation System***

N. Freedman gave an overview of NewMo, Newton's microtransit service. NewMo was first conceived as a replacement for a transportation system for seniors that had been run through the senior center. The previous transportation system, which paid a taxi company a subsidy to provide trips for seniors, was not able to provide quality service due to driver shortages. In 2019, the city partnered with Via for provision of software and operators and launched NewMo for seniors. NewMo covered all of Newton and provided transportation to select medical appointments across the border for a fare adjusted based on income. The service also allowed seniors to preschedule recurring appointments.

The initial evaluation of NewMo was met with mixed results. While NewMo was helping people to get out of single-occupancy vehicles and bringing them to destinations on time, several performance metrics indicated more challenges to be overcome. The City was paying a flat fee to provide 25,000 trips, and the low ridership caused the City to pay a high cost per trip. The service had no backup plans for driver no-shows or medical appointments scheduled for a late hour. Satisfaction rate or sharing rate was lower than desired. The meandering aspect of on-demand service made some senior riders nervous about using it for medical appointments, and seniors also required greater attention in customer service.

After initial evaluation, the City built off of NewMo to open the service to everyone and to provide travel everywhere in Newton. The service expansion was a result of several interim steps that resulted in very-low ridership. Once the City made NewMo available to all people with additional vehicles, ridership increased and all other performance metrics indicated improvements in terms of the sharing rate and satisfaction rate. Program success was also visible in user demographics: NewMo served low-income residents, single parents, people with disabilities, and school-age children, as well as commuters from neighboring cities. The City is also working with refugee sponsors to get the refugees to use the system.

Despite program success, N. Freedman stated that the City is faced with challenges. One of the biggest concerns is finances. The City has relied on largely state and MPO grants and impact fees from developers to develop and maintain the program. If the City decides to expand the program, overall cost will go up regardless of improved efficiency. Due to a lack of a regular source of funding for the operating budget, the long-term sustainability of the program is uncertain. The City has identified fundraisers

as a way to secure funding. Also, ridership and population density are critical to microtransit as they relate to trip sharing, an important performance measure. The City is looking to work with Waltham, Watertown, and Wellesley in order to expand NewMo across borders. As the City seeks to improve the transportation system, however, density might be a limiting factor to maximizing NewMo's potential.

### ***Microtransit as Part of the Mobility Toolkit***

C. Van Eyken discussed strategies to improve transit service and how microtransit could complement the effort to implement transit enhancements.

Three surveys led by TransitCenter indicate that transit riders call for reliable service, short travel times, and safe and comfortable vehicles and stations. Transit providers can meet these expectations by building a comprehensive network that is integrated and easy to navigate. However, limited resources, including street spaces, have made it challenging for transit providers to provide high-quality service to all riders and caused competition for service allocation.

There are still ways to increase transit speed and reliability by implementing improvements in an incremental fashion. For routes that are highly productive, this can be achieved by increasing the number and length of bus lanes in congested corridors, balancing bus stop distances, applying transit signal prioritization, and implementing all-door boarding. For routes that are less productive than high-performing routes, service improvements can still be made by building walkable, transit-oriented neighborhoods and cities, although transit agencies may have a limited role in land-use decisions. Microtransit service, when complemented with Complete Streets policies, could contribute to a comprehensive bus network redesign that provides the maximum level of service to urban areas and first- and last-mile solutions in suburban neighborhoods.

C. Van Eyken raised three points to consider with regards to microtransit. First, microtransit service often comes at a high cost. It costs more to operate than fixed-route service and might cost even more than low-performing fixed-routes. Moreover, microtransit is not productive for a transit agency to run; existing projects have underperformed the fixed-route services they replaced. Second, decision-makers have to bear in mind the opportunity cost of running a microtransit program, since the money spent on microtransit could be spent differently on proven solutions in places where transit is highly utilized already. Third, given that microtransit poses issues of productivity and opportunity cost to transit agencies, many of which are faced with constrained resources today, decision-makers need to define a clear role for microtransit before implementing the service. Microtransit service is not a replacement for reliable and frequent fixed-route service, but it can be an improvement over existing

paratransit services or fill gaps in areas that are topographically challenging for fixed-route service.

Another point to consider that is unique to microtransit is dispatching strategies. Dispatching can improve the responsiveness and reliability of paratransit services, which typically require customers to book in advance and send them on circuitous, time-consuming trips. Diversifying handling methods is also critical to the responsiveness and reliability of microtransit.

Existing programs have produced mixed results. LA Metro's partnership with Via resulted in increased operating expenses—double the amount the agency spends on the average bus trip. C. Van Eyken explained that the agency did not examine how microtransit could augment the existing fixed-route service. Similarly, AC Transit's demand-responsive shuttle, named Flex, generated less ridership than the fixed-route bus service that it replaced; although Flex had a much lower operating cost than a fixed-route service. King County Metro's partnership with Via, on the other hand, brought additional service to areas with topographical limitations where fixed-route service was not working well.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a dramatic reduction in transit ridership, and ridership remains below its pre-pandemic levels. While many riders have been working from home, there are riders, who are disproportionately low income and people of color, who still depend on transit for day-to-day journeys. Frequent, reliable networks are the best means of delivering service to all riders, and there are proven strategies to achieving high service standards, although they are not universally applicable to every scenario. Microtransit can play a role in a transit system, but transit providers must think carefully about where they put microtransit services so that the cost does not go out of control and so that the target population is effectively served.

### **3. Discussion**

#### ***Misconceptions about microtransit***

A. Constantino explained about the challenge of communicating to the public about the difference between microtransit and dial-a-ride service. She stated that a lot of the riders that used dial-a-ride did not understand that GatraGo was open to everyone, although GATRA had already done rebranding of the vehicle and public engagement to inform the public of service changes.

N. Freedman stated that microtransit service requires a minimum scale to make it viable.

***Inclusionary practices for non-smartphone users***

N. Freedman stated that the 80 percent of senior riders reserve NewMo through their smartphones. All ride requests go through the mobile app, so the drivers do not see whether reservations are made through the mobile app or by phone. However, phone call reservations are disadvantageous to mobile apps because riders will not be notified of vehicle delays or changes.

P. Kennedy explained that although the GoLink service can be made available by phone calls, it has been difficult to raise awareness of different reservation options due to high mobile app usage.

***Disabilities training for microtransit operators; Coordination with the disability community***

N. Freedman explained that Via provides a short, live training for drivers of the wheelchair-accessible vehicles. The transportation division is also currently working with the disability coordinator to improve the microtransit service for people that need care and support. The City began using sedans so that riders could get in and out of the vehicles easier, and the City adopted a special system where anyone who is approved for disability service could get the door-to-door service instead of the corner-to-corner service.

A. Constantino responded that all of GATRA's operators receive disability awareness training through the Massachusetts Rural Transit Assistance Program.

P. Kennedy stated that the local provider that provides 80 percent of DART's microtransit service is required to have disabilities training. Riders can also specify their needs through their profile or ride request.

***Best practices in microtransit***

C. Van Eyken explained that in Seattle, having a microtransit service allowed King County Metro to expand its network to places where a fixed-route service cannot operate due to topographic limitations. It highlights the advantage of microtransit in transit—having a smaller vehicle, which does not have to conform to the street grid, makes it possible to serve people in places where a bus cannot go.

***Best operating model for microtransit***

N. Freedman stated that public transportation should be public in order to hit public sector goals. But when it comes to managing operations, many cities are not set up to perform transit operations and, therefore, contract with private companies, some of which demonstrate business practices that cities do not support. She believes that

ongoing operations funding should be available for microtransit programs that are correctly implemented and achieving important goals.

P. Kennedy explained that DART had decided to prioritize cost savings in order to maximize service improvements using available operation dollars. While DART is working on securing more operational dollars, DART is hoping for federal assistance on transit operations due to little support from the state.

A. Constantino responded that having a “toolbox” of various operating models is important for GATRA to serve communities with a wide range of constraints and possibilities. Being flexible is crucial as the society becomes more susceptible to change.

### ***Resource***

Transit Cooperative Research Program published Redesigning Transit Networks for the New Mobility Future, a research [report](#) on bus redesign that addresses micromobility options.

## **4. Questions and Answers**

Jennifer Glass (Lincoln Select Board) asked whether GATRA serves any tourist destinations. A. Constantino responded that GATRA serves the Plymouth waterfront area with GATRA GO Coastline, and the Wrentham Outlets, Patriot Place, and Plainridge Casino with GATRA GO United.

Anna Leslie (Allston Brighton Health Collaborative) asked about the trip frequency of the different GATRA GO routes. A Constantino stated that the service is set up to be on demand, so each service will travel to or from anywhere within the geographical boundary during the service hours.

P. Kennedy was asked whether DART uses a provider or provides its own service. P. Kennedy explained that DART subcontracts with MV Transportation for demand-responsive service and DART provides vehicles. DART also partners with UberPool, which went through a request for proposal (RFP) process, to supplement the contract. That contract is supplemented with a partnership.

Josh Weiland (MBTA) asked whether the microtransit drivers are guaranteed minimum wage and actual employment, and whether the contract with Via guarantees any labor relations. P. Kennedy explained that DART writes a guaranteed minimum wage into their contract with subcontractors. However, the contract does not apply to Uber, nor does it provide the benefits that are guaranteed for the agency’s direct hires.

N. Freedman stated that the NewMo drivers are treated as independent contractors and

are currently paid an hourly wage of \$29-\$37. A. Constantino responded that the microtransit drivers are employed and trained in the same manner as GATRA's fixed-route drivers, although they are employed by the operators contracted with GATRA to provide service in the agency's service area. Depending on the operator, some of the drivers are unionized, while others are not.

Susan Barrett (Town of Lexington) asked how customer service agents are paid. N. Freedman responded that Via chose to handle the matter after the City discussed the low customer satisfaction rates from seniors and the decreased call volume.

Christine Madore (Massachusetts Housing Partnership) asked about NewMo's most significant barrier to expanding its service area beyond Newton. N. Freedman responded that a lack of funding is keeping the City from adding more vehicles to the fleet.

A question was addressed to N. Freedman about whether NewMo provides trips that can be done on transit, assuming transit is running and the riders have no mobility limitations. N. Freedman stated that the quality of transit service is often too poor: trip frequency could be too low, walking distance could be too long, or the trip might require multiple transfers. She emphasized that replacing a transit trip with a NewMo trip is different from replacing a transit trip with a private TNC trip because NewMo is a shared service and has wait times of 15 minutes or less.

Colette Aufranc (Town of Wellesley) asked how strict geofencing is applied to identifying service boundaries for microtransit. N. Freedman responded that geofencing could be limited to town lines with a few excepted addresses.

C. Aufranc asked about reporting requirements for back-end analytics and real-time accessibility of the reports and graphs. N. Freedman responded that reports are comprehensive and can be accessed at any time.

## **5. Closing and Next Steps**

S. Johnston discussed social media outlets for continued engagement with the forum organizers and upcoming events in the Transit Working Group.

## Attendance

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<b>Attendee</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
Abigail Adams	Brockton Area Transit
Imaikalani Aiu	Town of Weston
John Alessi	City of Malden
Jessica Alvarez	Foursquare ITP
Daniel Amstutz	Town of Arlington
Alexander Anhwere-James	MBTA
Colette Aufranc	Town of Wellesley
Kennedy Avery	Boston City Council
Susan Barrett	Town of Lexington
Edward Bates	MassDOT
Louise Baxter	Transit Riders Union
Jeff Bennett	128 Business Council
Ally Bull	Massachusetts Commission for the Blind
Brandon Burns	US Department of Transportation
Charlie Cabot	MBTA
Catherine Cagle	City of Waltham
Bob Campbell	MBTA
Maggie Cohn	Mission Hill Link
Martha Collins	Town of Wellesley
William Conroy	City of Boston
Angela Constantino	GATRA
Saundarya Dandagawhal	City of Boston
Jacob Deck	Lawrence University
David Derrig	AECOM
Tom Devine	City of Salem
Lenard Diggins	Regional Transit Advisory Council
Christopher Dilorio	Town of Hull
Karen Dumaine	Neponset Valley TMA
Wes Edwards	MBTA
Rachel Fichtenbaum	MassMobility
Jamilee Fish	Patrick Engineering
Maria Foster	Town of Brookline
Nicole Freedman	City of Newton
Sophia Galimore	TransAction Associates
Glenn Ann Geiler	Brockton Area Transit

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<b>Attendee</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
Jennifer Gelinias	Town of Burlington
Gail Gilliland	
Jennifer Glass	Town of Lincoln
Shayna Gleason	University of Massachusetts Boston
Russell Glynn	Coalition for Reimagined Mobility
Kristine Gorman	Jacobs
Roberta Groch	State of Rhode Island
Perry Grossman	Brookline Bike Advisory Committee
Marah Holland	MAPC
Charles Hornig	
Dan Jaffe	02129 Neighbor Alliance
Andrew Jennings	Lowell Regional Transit Authority
Sam Jones	Mott McDonald
Patrick Kennedy	Space Between Design
George Kirby	
Anthony Komornick	Merrimack Valley Planning Commission
David Koses	City of Newton
Ernesta Krackiewicz	
Derek Krevat	MassDOT
Sujatha Krishan	Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission
Joanne LaFerrara	GATRA
Aniko Laszlo	MBTA
Andrea Leary	North Shore TMA
Sarah Leung	City of Boston
Anna Leslie	Allston Brighton Health Collaborative
Christine Madore	Massachusetts Housing Partnership
Erik Maki	Tetra Tech
Katie Malkin	Via Transportation
Jeff Maxtutis	BETA
Constance Mellis	Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission
James Mirras	Circuit
Chase Modestow	MetroWest Regional Transit Authority
Galen Mook	Massachusetts Bicycle Coalition
Hayes Morrison	MassDOT
Alaa Mukahhal	City of Boston
Scott Mullen	A Better City
Joe Mulligan	MBTA
Adi Nochur	MAPC

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<b>Attendee</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
Shona Norman	Cape Ann Transportation Authority
Jane Obbagy	Obbagy Consulting
Ari Ofsevit	Institute for Transportation and Development Policy
Steven Olanoff	Town of Westwood
Marc Older	
Thomas O'Rourke	Neponset River Regional Chamber
Franny Osman	Town of Acton
Howard Ostroff	
Boris Palchik	Foursquare ITP
Jason Palitsch	495/MetroWest Partnership
Rick Parker	Burlington Area Chamber of Commerce
Barbara Parmenter	350 Mass
Amira Patterson	MBTA Advisory Board
Peter Pelletier	Town of Medway
Robert Peters	
Matthew Petersen	TransitMatters
Travis Pollack	MAPC
Natalie Raffol	McMahon Associates
Malcolm Ragan	Town of Stow
Kate Reid	
Maureen Reilly Meagher	
Megan Rhodes	Franklin Regional Council of Governments
Monique Richardson	
Gracyn Rountree	Massachusetts House of Representatives
Thomas Rozelle	MassDOT
Jim Salvie	
Mark Schieldrop	AAA Northeast
Lynn Schoeff	Town of Needham
Sharon Schumack	
Jon Seward	Community Design Partnership
Judy Shanley	Easterseals
Sukanya Sharma	MAPC
Bob Shay	
Stephen Silveira	Mintz
O. Robert Simha	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Sharna Small Borsellino	EOHHS
Laura Smead	Town of Canton
Sonali Soneji	VHB

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<b>Attendee</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
John Strauss	Town of Burlington
Dimitria Sullivan	Town of Dedham
Daphne Thompson	Northeast Arc
Jeremy Thompson	495/MetroWest Partnership
Daniel Toner	
Steven Tyler	Howard Stein Hudson
Amber Vaillancourt	MassDOT
Chris Van Eyken	TransitCenter
Matt Warfield	City of Boston
Lisa Weber	EOHHS
Josh Weiland	MBTA
Marcus Weiss	Economic Development Assistance Consortium
Laura Wiener	City of Watertown
Stephen Winslow	City of Malden
Erin Wortman	Town of Stoneham
Darlene Wynne	City of Beverly

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**MPO Staff/Central Transportation Planning Staff**

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Matt Archer  
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Heyne Kim

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**Title VI Specialist**

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857.702.3700 (voice)

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- **Relay Using Voice Carry-over:** 866.887.6619
- **Relay Using Text to Speech:** 866.645.9870

For more information, including numbers for Spanish speakers, visit <https://www.mass.gov/massrelay>.